

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 418 805

PS 026 490

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 TITLE What Are the Issues That Confront High-Risk Families: How Can Organizations Such as ERIC and the National Parent Information Network Help?
 PUB DATE 1998-04-00
 NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Parenthood in America Conference (Madison, WI, April 18-21, 1998).
 PUB TYPE Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *At Risk Persons; Child Rearing; *Information Needs; *Information Services; Information Sources; Models; Organizations (Groups); *Parent Education; Parenting Skills; *Parents; Personal Narratives
 IDENTIFIERS ERIC; National Parent Information Network; Parents AskERIC

ABSTRACT

Using a story told by a home visitor in a family literacy program for at-risk families, this paper illustrates issues related to building trust within among parents and the community, deciding on eligibility for services, accessing community resources, and building and maintaining strong relationships with clients. Maintaining that such stories highlight the critical issues that parents and practitioners face on a daily basis, and that it is important to hear and respect parents and professionals who are providing direct services to needy families, the paper observes that national organizations such as ERIC and the National Parent Information Network can help parents, and professionals who work with them, by supporting their information and resource needs. Parents AskERIC provides answers to parents' and professionals' questions related to parenting. A visual presentation of a parenting education spectrum included in the paper has been helpful in ensuring that responses to parenting questions remain within the scope and mission of these organizations. This spectrum graphic may also help communities identify the type of support they are providing and identify gaps in services. The spectrum identifies five types of services for parents: (1) resource and referral; (2) suggestions and strategies; (3) community programs; (4) formal instruction; and (5) counseling. ERIC and the National Parent Information Network provide the first three of these types of services. (Contains 11 references.) (KB)

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Panel Presentation

What are the issues that confront high-risk families; how can organizations such as ERIC and the National Parent Information Network help?¹

Anne S. Robertson

One of the differences that I think I have observed between urban and rural cultures is that people in rural cultures take more time to tell stories. They tell stories about the weather, their pets, their friends, their neighbors, and their relatives. In many rural communities, your neighbors are also likely to be your relatives, and those stories can be particularly interesting. These stories are an important part of the history and knowledge that weaves a community together. So if you will bear with me for a few minutes, I would like to start my presentation with a story that I hope you will find interesting. It is based on real events and people, but the names have been changed.

A Home Visitor's Story

Margaret was one of several home visitors hired as part of a newly funded family literacy program designed to serve "high-risk" families. Through a lot of creative planning, the new staff members were able to provide a family center in a small space provided by a local church. The space had an office area, preschool area, infant room, and a multi-purpose room for parents. The center was open four days and one evening each week with a variety of activities for children and parents. The center was closed one day a week so that the local food pantry, another group that shared the church space, could disperse food to needy families.

Some of the center staff grumbled about the shared arrangement with the food pantry, but Margaret saw it as an opportunity to meet families in the neighborhood. She opened the preschool area for families who stayed. It was during one of these informal play times that Margaret met Carol and two preschool children, Ben and Cara.

Carol appeared to be the children's grandmother, and Margaret told Carol about some of the programs that the center offered for the adults while the children attended preschool. While the children played, Carol's story began to unfold.

She told Margaret that Ben and Cara were not her children or grandchildren but belonged to an "ex-boyfriend" who had left them at her house about three weeks ago. She was running low on food and diapers for the children. Also, Carol said that she felt guilty because her daughter, son-in-law, and real grandchildren were back in town needing a place to stay. As Margaret listened, she wondered how she could help Carol. The diapers and food weren't a problem; Margaret made sure that there were extras tucked into Carol's food pantry bags. The bigger issues were the care of the children and Carol's capacity to provide that care.

¹ Paper presented at the Parenthood in America Conference in Madison, Wisconsin, April 1998.

Carol explained that the father had custody of the children because of the mother's substance abuse, and the mother lived out of the area. Margaret asked if Carol had thought about contacting the state department of children's services to get more support for the children? Carol paused, then shook her head, "I couldn't do that; you can't trust those people." However, when Carol left, she gave Margaret her address and said that it was "OK" for her to stop by. Since Carol lived in the same housing project as some of the other families that Margaret visited, she agreed to stop by in a few days.

Margaret shared Carol's situation at the next center staff meeting and asked for help. Several of the other home visitors immediately said that this situation should be reported to children's services for neglect and the center shouldn't be involved at all. Margaret cringed. Reporting Carol at this stage would undermine Carol's trust, and when it got to the neighbors, it might undermine the new programs at the family center.

Another issue with some staff was whether or not the grant that funded Margaret's position could provide services for people in Carol's situation. Margaret's grant specifically stated that legal guardians with at least one young child were eligible for the program. Although the children fit into the age category, Carol was not the legal guardian. Also, the family center had a rule that required parents or grandparents to accompany their children. It had seemed like a good rule at the time, essentially preventing the preschool program from becoming a baby-sitting service; however, once again, Carol didn't fit the requirements. Margaret pointed out that of all the families and children who had been at the center, this one appeared to be from the "most in need" category that was specified in the family center funding.

The staff disagreed on how to handle this situation; however, Margaret's supervisor supported her decision to visit Carol and see if she could be linked to other support services in the area. A few days later, after she had finished another home visit in the neighborhood, Margaret stopped by Carol's duplex. Over half of Margaret's families were without phones so "stopping by," on a prearranged day, was the norm in that area.

Carol was home and greeted Margaret warmly. Ben and Cara were there, and Cara came to sit on Margaret's lap. Margaret also met Carol's very pregnant daughter and two grandchildren. It wasn't long before Margaret realized that Carol's situation was more complicated than she had originally thought.

Carol's daughter and grandchildren had just moved into her duplex. Carol's son-in-law had just been released from jail and had a job earning minimum wage, but he had been unable to find housing for his family. Since he had been convicted of a felony, he was ineligible for subsidized housing. If Carol's daughter divorced or legally separated from her husband, she would be eligible for state support, but they didn't consider divorce an option.

Margaret observed during her visit that there were three adults and four preschoolers

living in the one-bedroom home. There were no toys, books, or other suitable activities for the children, other than a television set, which was turned on throughout the visit. Although it was a nice day, the shades were drawn, and Carol was clearly cautious because she knew that she was in violation of her lease by letting so many people stay with her. She said they rarely went outside because she was afraid of being reported by the neighbors. Cara stayed on Margaret's lap throughout the visit, but the other children either watched television or scrambled around the duplex in between shouts from Carol and her daughter to "straighten up."

Margaret did learn that Carol attended a church that sent a bus through the neighborhood on Sundays. The minister didn't know about Carol's situation, and Margaret suggested that the congregation might be able to help. Carol said that would be fine if Margaret wanted to talk with the minister.

Margaret left Carol's house with the promise to "stop by" again in a few days and extended another invitation for all of them to visit the family center for the next program. Carol's daughter and children were eligible for programs at the center, but Margaret didn't have the heart to say that Ben and Cara couldn't attend. Margaret would prefer dealing with the staff grumbling than turning the children away.

Driving back to the center, Margaret took the long way. She needed some quiet time to think. She knew she would face opposition from some of the staff if she suggested that the center should be helping Carol's family. Margaret also knew that there were no quick solutions here. She was skating on very thin ice by not reporting Carol to both the housing authority and children's services. She worked with professionals from these agencies regularly, and she worried about losing their trust too. If only there was a way to solve the two most pressing concerns quickly—housing for Carol's daughter and support for Ben and Cara—without undermining the relationship with either Carol or the agencies.

Margaret began to think of ways that she could collaborate with other agencies. She knew that a person had been hired in the community to support homeless families and that this person was linked to the center. There was also the minister at the church who might help. Margaret also felt that she needed to talk with the director of the housing authority to see if she could negotiate some more time for Carol, without actually reporting her. Later that afternoon, Margaret and the housing director had a "discussion" on the phone about a certain "hypothetical situation." The director agreed that in such a "hypothetical situation" they would probably give the tenant a couple of extra months before issuing an eviction.

Over the next few weeks, through collaboration with the staff person who worked with the homeless population and the church, Carol's daughter and son-in-law were able to find housing for their family. Ben and Cara's father returned, and Margaret included him in the center's activities, although he rarely attended. The minister at the church linked a volunteer from the congregation to visit Carol. Ben and Cara continued to bounce back

and forth between their father's house and Carol's. The rule about the center providing services only for parents or grandparents and their families was never changed, but it was adjusted for children who fell into the "homeless" category. It was decided that Ben and Cara fit into that category and were eligible for the preschool when Carol attended.

Margaret was never under the illusion that she had "solved" this family's problems, but she did feel good that life for them appeared to be better on most days.

The Importance of Stories Such as Margaret's and Carol's

There are several reasons that stories like Margaret's are important. First is because we need to take time to hear and respect the parents and the professionals who are involved in providing direct service to needy families. For those of us who are not working in direct family service, it is easy to forget the critical issues that parents and practitioners face on a daily basis. Carol's situation was more distressed than some of Margaret's other cases, but it was not unusual. In fact, when word got around the neighborhood that the center had helped Carol, other people in similar situations begin to come to the center for support. Within two years, the center had outgrown its space at the church.

Another reason this story is important is because it addresses so many of the critical problems that neighborhood programs face when supporting and educating high-risk families. Some examples of the problems that Margaret faced as she worked with Carol included:

- Ethical considerations for personnel who work with high-risk families, and deciding when a family should, or should not, be reported to a state agency.
- Insufficiently flexible or effective public systems in education, housing, welfare, and justice, which focus on a deficit model or are inaccessible to those families with the greatest need.
- Damaged community social networks, which have created gaps in the safety nets that should protect our most vulnerable families.
- Limited employment opportunities within communities, which force young families to remain in poverty or to move away from familiar support systems.
- Differing viewpoints among family support professionals regarding methods and practice, which frequently undermine program effectiveness.
- Poor communication among individuals, programs, and agencies, which prevents the transfer of skills and education to the families and the development of sustainable change for the family.

Everyday, there are family support professionals like Margaret who skate on "thin ice" as they negotiate new ways to effectively serve parents and children. We need more of these dedicated people in our field. With limited time, resources, and energy, they scramble to find support and validation for these new directions. Effective programs are constantly being pushed beyond their limits. It is very important that programs working with high-risk families take the time to examine and focus on their mission, then develop links to collaborate with other organizations for service delivery outside of the program's scope. With this strategy, they can avoid problems that may develop from overextending the program's resources.

How Can National Organizations Such as ERIC and NPIN Help?

At ERIC and the National Parent Information Network, we continue to examine better ways to serve parents, and professionals who work with parents, given our mission and the resources available to us. What can we do? What are our limits?

Certainly, information gathering, storing, and sharing are the foundation of the ERIC system and NPIN, but a cornerstone of that foundation is collaboration with a wide variety of individuals, agencies, and organizations. We work very hard to listen to what is needed in the field, and our services and projects are developed to support those information and resource needs.

One of those services, Parents AskERIC, has grown rapidly and has challenged us to look at the level of parent support we can and cannot do well from our location. Through Parents AskERIC, parents, or professionals who work with parents, ask a wide variety of questions on topics such as child development, parenting education, health, or school-related issues (see Figure 1).

sibling rivalry	parental involvement
toilet training	special needs children
divorce	father involvement
custody issues	home schooling
benchmarks in child development	aggressive behavior
family communication	positive discipline
adolescent behavior	program development
substance abuse	choosing a school
resources for gifted children	family literacy

Figure 1. Parenting question topics.

Each question receives an individual response, which typically includes citations from our database, a list of relevant parenting materials and organizations, and encouragement to link to community-based resources. With over 50,000 parenting education programs available throughout the United States (Carter, 1996, p. 4), it has been helpful for us to identify those programs by using what we have called "The Parenting Education Spectrum" (see Figure 2). Then as we respond to parenting questions, we can look at how that response fits into the spectrum, being careful not to move beyond our scope and mission.

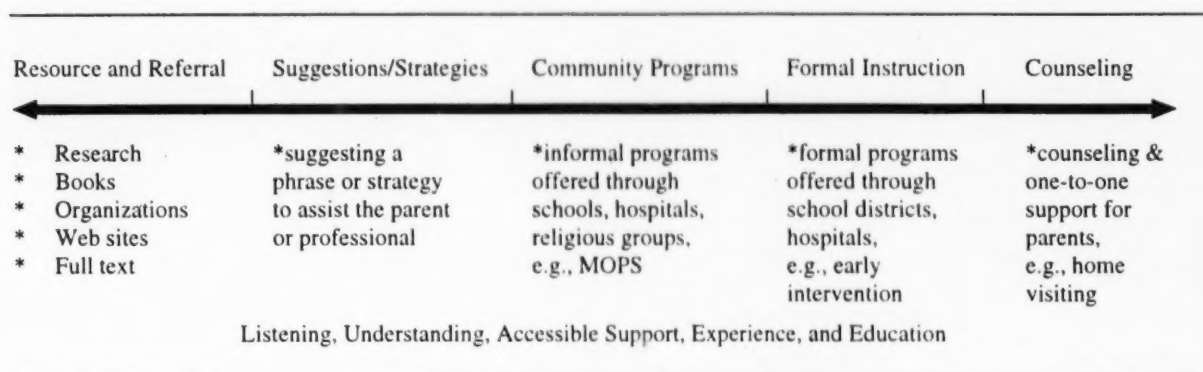


Figure 2. Parenting education spectrum.

The spectrum may also help communities understand what support is currently being provided, and it can also help them discover where there may be gaps in service delivery. Identifying those weak areas, through a community-wide needs assessment, may be useful for designating the parenting support services that may be most needed within a neighborhood.

Divided into five major sections, at one far end of the spectrum are programs that provide information, resource, and referral. As we move along the spectrum, we can see that the programs in the next section may provide a strategy or suggestion to the parent. In the middle are informal parenting programs that may be run by volunteers and may meet in community locations, such as a church, synagogue, or family center. These informal programs are important networks that support families and build relationships. As we move to the other end of the spectrum, we see that the parenting education gradually becomes more intensive and one to one, until at the opposite side are programs that include such models as home visiting and counseling.

While all parents may need access to the entire spectrum of parenting education during their parenting experience, it is very difficult for one organization to provide the complete range of services effectively. At ERIC and the National Parent Information Network, we

fit into the far side of the spectrum that provides information, resources, and referrals. We may also suggest a strategy and, if necessary, try and provide parents with a link to a program within their own community that fits into another category in the parenting education spectrum. From our location, it is impossible for us to provide the type of support required for more intensive parenting education. These types of services are best accomplished by community-based programs, such as Margaret's family center, since the staff can develop a one-to-one relationship with the family. Our hope is that by increasing access to relevant, high-quality research and resources, at the time the resources are most needed, professionals like Margaret, and parents like Carol, will become more competent in their roles and feel more capable when reaching out to help others within their community.

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